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*A Few Personal
Recollections*

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JOHN M. SYNGE:
A FEW PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

John M. Synge:

*A Few Personal Recollections with
Biographical Notes.*

Masefield, John
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LETCHWORTH

GARDEN CITY PRESS LIMITED

1916

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JOHN M. SYNGE

I FIRST met John M. Synge at the room of a common friend, up two pairs of stairs, in an old house in Bloomsbury, on a Monday night of January, 1903. When I entered the room, he was sitting in a rush-bottomed chair, talking to a young man just down from Oxford. My host introduced me, with the remark that he wanted us to know each other.

Synge stood up to shake hands with me. He was of the middle height, about five feet eight or nine. My first impression of him was of a dark, grave face, with a great deal in it, changing from the liveliness of conversation to a gravity of scrutiny. After we had shaken hands, I passed to the other end of the room to greet other friends. We did not speak to each other again that night.

When I sat at the other end of the room my chair was opposite Synge's chair. Whenever I raised my eyes I saw him, and wondered who he could be. Disordered people

look disordered, unusual people look unusual. A youth with long hair, a velvet coat, extravagant manners, and the other effeminacies of emptiness looks the charlatan he is. Synge gave one from the first the impression of a strange personality. He was of a dark type of Irishman, though not black-haired. Something in his air gave one the fancy that his face was dark from gravity. Gravity filled the face and haunted it, as though the man behind were forever listening to life's case before passing judgment. It was "a dark, grave face, with a great deal in it." The hair was worn neither short nor long. The moustache was rather thick and heavy. The lower jaw, otherwise clean shaven, was made remarkable by a tuft of hair, too small to be called a goatee, upon the lower lip. The head was of a good size. There was nothing niggardly, nothing abundant about it. The face was pale, the cheeks were rather drawn. In my memory they were rather seamed and old-looking. The eyes were at once smoky and kindling. The mouth, not well seen below the moustache, had a great play of humour on it. But for this humorous mouth, the kindling in the

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eyes, and something not robust in his build, he would have been more like a Scotchman than an Irishman.

I remember wondering if he were Irish. His voice, very guttural and quick, with a kind of lively bitterness in it, was of a kind of Irish voice new to me at that time. I had known a good many Irish people; but they had all been vivacious and picturesque, rapid in intellectual argument, and vague about life. There was nothing vivacious, picturesque, rapid or vague about Synge. The rush-bottomed chair next to him was filled by talker after talker, but Synge was not talking, he was answering. When someone spoke to him he answered with the grave Irish courtesy. He offered nothing of his own. When the talk became general he was silent. Sometimes he went to a reddish earthenware pot upon the table, took out a cigarette and lit it at a candle. Then he sat smoking, pushed back a little from the circle, gravely watching. Sometimes I heard his deep, grave voice assenting "Ye-es, ye-es," with meditative boredom. Sometimes his little finger flicked off the ash on to the floor. His manner was that of a man too

much interested in the life about him to wish to be more than a spectator. His interest was in life, not in ideas. He was new to that particular kind of life. Afterwards, when I had come to know him, I heard him sum up every person there with extraordinary point and sparkle. Often since then, eager to hear more of my friend, I have asked men who met him casually for a report of him. So often they have said, "He was a looker-on at life. He came in and sat down and looked on. He gave nothing in return. He never talked, he only listened. I never got much out of him. I never got to the real Synge. I was never conscious of what he felt. Sometimes I felt that there was nothing in him. I never knew him respond. I never knew him do or say anything to suggest what he was in himself." When I hear these phrases, I know that those who utter them really met Synge. His place was outside the circle, gravely watching, gravely summing up, with a brilliant malice, the fools and wise ones inside.

A week, or perhaps a fortnight, later, I met him again at the same place, among

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the same people. He was talking brightly and charmingly to a woman. Men usually talk their best to women. When I turn over my memories of him, it seems that his grave courtesy was only gay when he was talking to women. His talk to women had a lightness and charm. It was sympathetic; never self-assertive, as the hard, brilliant Irish intellect so often is. He liked people to talk to him. He liked to know the colours of people's minds. He liked to be amused. His merriest talk was like playing catch with an apple of banter, which one afterwards ate and forgot.

He never tried to be brilliant. I never heard him say a brilliant thing. He said shrewd things. I do not know what he could have done if stirred to talk. Few people born out of old, sunny countries talk well. I never heard him engaged with a brilliant talker, either man or woman. He told me that once, in Paris, he had gone to hear a brilliant talker—a French poet, now dead. It was like him that he did not speak to the talker. "We sat round on chairs and the great man talked."

During the evening, I spoke a few words

to Synge about some Irish matter. We pushed back our chairs out of the circle and discussed it. I did not know at that time that he was a writer. I knew by name most of the writers in the Irish movement. Synge was not one of the names. I thought that he must be at work on the political side. I wronged him in this. He never played any part in politics : politics did not interest him. He was the only Irishman I have ever met who cared nothing for either the political or the religious issue. He had a prejudice against one Orange district, because the people in it were dour. He had a prejudice against one Roman Catholic district, because the people in it were rude. Otherwise his mind was untroubled. Life was what interested him. He would have watched a political or religious riot with gravity, with pleasure in the spectacle, and malice for the folly. He would have taken no side, and felt no emotion, except a sort of pity when the losers could go on no longer. The question was nothing to him. All that he asked for was to hear what it made people say and to see what it made people do.

Towards one in the morning, our host

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asked Synge and me to sup with him. We foraged in the pantry, and found some eggs, but nothing in which to cook them. Our host said that he would try a new trick, of boiling eggs in a paper box. We were scornful about it, thinking it impossible. He brought out paper, made a box (with some difficulty), filled it with water, and boiled an egg in it. Synge watched the task with the most keen interest. "You've done it," he said. "I never thought you would." Afterwards he examined the paper box. I suppose he planned to make one in Aran in the summer. While we supped, our host chaffed us both for choosing to eat cold meats when we might have had nice hot eggs. It was at this supper that I first came to know the man.

When we got into the street, we found that we lodged within a few minutes' walk of each other. We walked together to our lodgings. He said that he had been for a time in Aran, that he had taken some photographs there, and that he would be pleased to show them to me, if I would call upon him later in the morning. He said that he had just come to London from Paris, and that he found Bloomsbury strange after the

Quartier Latin. He was puzzled by the talk of the clever young men from Oxford. "That's a queer way to talk. They all talk like that. I wonder what makes them talk like that? I suppose they're always stewing over dead things."

Synge lodged in a front room on the second floor of No. 4, Handel Street, Bloomsbury. It was a quiet house in a quiet, out-of-the-way street. His room there was always very clean and tidy. The people made him very comfortable. Afterwards, in 1907, during his last visit to London, he lodged there again, in the same room. I called upon him there in the afternoon of the day on which I last saw him.

When I first called upon him, I found him at his type-writer, hard at work. He was making a fair copy of one of his two early one-act plays, then just finished. His type-writer was a small portable machine of the Blick variety. He was the only writer I have ever known who composed direct upon a type-writing machine. I have often seen him at work upon it. Sometimes, when I called to ask him to come for a walk, he had matter to finish off before we could start.

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He worked rather slowly and very carefully, sitting very upright. He composed slowly. He wrote and re-wrote his plays many times. I remember that on this first occasion the table had a pile of type-written drafts upon it, as well as a few books, one or two of them by M. Pierre Loti. He thought M. Loti the best living writer of prose. There are marks of M. Loti's influence in the Aran book. Much of the Aran manuscript was on the table at that time. Synge asked me to wait for a few minutes while he finished the draft at which he was working. He handed me a black tobacco-pouch and a packet of cigarette-papers. While I rolled a cigarette he searched for his photographs and at last handed them to me. They were quarter-plate prints in a thick bundle. There must have been fifty of them. They were all of the daily life of Aran: women carrying kelp, men in hookers, old people at their doors, a crowd at the landing-place, men loading horses, people of vivid character, pigs and children playing together, etc. As I looked at them he explained them or commented on them in a way which made all sharp and bright. His talk was best when it was about

life or the ways of life. His mind was too busy with the life to be busy with the affairs or the criticism of life. His talk was all about men and women and what they did and what they said when life excited them. His mind was perhaps a little like Shakespeare's. We do not know what Shakespeare thought : I do not know what Synge thought. I don't believe anybody knew, or thinks he knows.

"There was something very nice about Synge." The friend who said this to me, added that "though the plays are cynical, he was not cynical in himself." I do not feel that the plays are cynical. They seem heartless at first sight. The abundant malicious zest in them gives them an air of cruelty. But in the plays, Synge did with his personality as he did in daily life. He buried his meaning deep. He covered his tragedy with mockeries.

More than a year ago a friend asked me what sort of man Synge was. I answered, "a perfect companion." The other day I saw that another friend, who knew him better than I, had described him as "the best companion." After that first day, when I called upon him at his room, we met fre-

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quently. We walked long miles together, generally from Bloomsbury to the river, along the river to Vauxhall, and back by Westminster to Soho. We sometimes dined together at a little French restaurant, called the Restaurant des Gourmets. The house still stands; but it has now grown to five times the size. The place where Synge and I used to sit has now been improved away. We spent happy hours there, talking, rolling cigarettes, and watching the life. "Those were great days," he used to say. He was the best companion for that kind of day.

Our talk was always about life. When we talked about writers (modern French and ancient English writers) it was not about their writings that we talked, but about the something kindling in them, which never got expressed. His theory of writing was this:—"No good writer can ever be translated." He used to quote triumphantly from Shakespeare's 130th Sonnet.

"As any she belied with false compare."

"How would you put that into French?" he asked.

He never talked about himself. He often talked of his affairs, his money, his little room in Paris, his meeting with odd characters, etc., but never of himself. He had wandered over a lot of Europe. He was silent about all that.

Very rarely, and then by chance, when telling of the life in Aran, or of some strange man in the train or in the steamer, he revealed little things about himself :—

“They asked me to fiddle to them, so that they might dance.”

“Do you play, then ? ”

“I fiddle a little. I try to learn something different for them every time. The last time I learned to do conjuring tricks. They’d get tired of me if I didn’t bring something new. I’m thinking of learning the penny whistle before I go again.”

I never heard him mention his early life nor what he endured in his struggles to find a form. I believe he never spoke about his writings, except to say that he wrote them slowly, many times over. His talk was always about vivid, picturesque, wild life. He took greater joy in what some frantic soul from Joyce’s country said when the

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policeman hit him than in anything of his own. He found no vivid life in England. He disliked England. I think he only knew London. Afterwards he stayed for a couple of weeks in Devonshire. London is a place where money can be made and spent. Devonshire is a place where elderly ladies invite retired naval officers to tea. England lies further to the north. He was never in any part of England where the country life is vigorous and picturesque. He believed England to be all suburb, like the "six counties overhung with smoke." Soon after our first meeting I was present at his first success. His two early plays, "Riders to the Sea" and "The Shadow of the Glen," were read aloud to about a dozen friends at the rooms of one who was always most generously helpful to writers not yet sure of their road. A lady read the plays very beautifully. Afterwards we all applauded. Synge learned his *métier* that night. Until then, all his work had been tentative and in the air. After that, he went forward, knowing what he could do.

For two or three months I met Synge almost daily. Presently he went back to Ireland (I believe to Aran) and I to "loathed

Devonshire." I met him again, later in the year. During the next few years, though he was not often in town, I met him fairly often whenever the Irish players came to London. Once I met him for a few days together in Dublin. He was to have stayed with me both in London and in Ireland ; but on both occasions his health gave way, and the visit was never paid. I remember sitting up talking with him through the whole of one winter night (in 1904). Later, when the Rokeby Velasquez was being talked of, I went with him to see the picture. We agreed that it was the kind of picture people paint when the mind is beginning to get languid. After we had seen the picture I walked with him to his hotel (the Kenilworth Hotel), talking about Irish art, which he thought was the kind of art people make when the mind has been languid for a long time. I never saw him angry. I never saw him vexed. I never heard him utter a hasty or an unkind word. I saw him visibly moved once to sadness, when someone told him how tourists had spoiled the country people in a part of Ireland. The Irish country people are simple and charming. Tourists make them servile, insolent and base.

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“The Irish are easily corrupted,” he said, “because they are so simple. When they’re corrupted, they’re hard, they’re rude, they’re everything that’s bad. But they’re only that where the low-class tourists go, from America, and Glasgow, and Liverpool, and these places.” He seldom praised people, either for their work or for their personality. When he spoke of acquaintances he generally quoted a third person. When he uttered a personal judgment it was always short, like “He’s a great fellow,” or “He’s a grand fellow,” or “Nobody in Ireland understands how big he is.”

On one occasion (I think in 1906) we lunched together (at the Vienna Café). He told me with huge delight about his adventures in the wilds. He had lodged in a cabin far from the common roads. There was no basin in his bedroom. He asked for one, so that he might wash. The people brought him a wooden box, worn smooth with much use. In the morning he was roused by his host with the cry, “Have you washed yourself yet? Herself is wanting the box to make up the bread in.”

I remember asking him what sensations

an author had when his play was being performed for the first time. "I sit still in my box," he said, "and curse the actors." He was in a very gay mood that afternoon, though his health was fast failing. He spoke with his usual merry malice about his throat. With the trouble in his throat he could not tell when he would be in England again. He was only in England once more. That was in late May or early June, 1907, when the Irish players gave a few performances at the Kingsway Theatre. I met him in the foyer of the theatre just before the first London performance of "The Playboy of the Western World." I had some talk with him then. During the performance I saw him in his box, "sitting still," as he said, watching with the singular grave intensity with which he watched life. It struck me then that he was the only person there sufficiently simple to be really interested in living people ; and that it was this simplicity which gave him his charm. He found the life in a man very well worth wonder, even though the man were a fool, or a knave, or just down from Oxford. At the end of the play I saw him standing in his box, gravely watching the

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actors as the curtain rose and again rose during the applause. Presently he turned away to speak to the lady who had read his plays on the night of his first success. The play was loudly applauded. Some people behind me—a youth and a girl—began to hiss. I remember thinking that they resembled the bird they imitated. I only saw Synge on two other occasions. I met him at a dinner party, but had no talk with him, and I called upon him at his old lodgings in Handel Street. He said :—

“Doesn’t it seem queer to you to be coming back here?”

“It seems only the other day that we were here.”

“Those were great days.”

“I wish we could have them again.”

“Ah,” he said, laughing his hard laugh, half a cough,

“Nature brings not back the mastodon,
Nor we those times.”

Presently he told me that he had been writing poetry. He handed me a type-written copy of a ballad, and asked me what I thought of it. I told him that I felt the

want of an explanatory stanza near the beginning. "Yes," he said. "But I can't take your advice, because then it would not be quite my own." He told me the wild picturesque story (of a murder in Connaught) which had inspired the ballad. His relish of the savagery made me feel that he was a dying man clutching at life, and clutching most wildly at violent life, as the sick man does. We went out shortly afterwards, and got into a cab, and drove to the Gourmets, and ate our last meal together. He was going to the theatre after dinner ; I had to go out of town. After dinner we got into another cab. He said he would give me a lift towards my station. We drove together along the Strand, talking of the great times we would have and of the jolly times we had had. None of our many talks together was happier than the last. I felt in my heart as we drove that I should never see him again. Our last talk together was to be a happy one.

He was later than he thought. He could not come all the way to my station. He had to turn off to his theatre.

At the top of Fleet Street hill we shook hands and said "So long" to each other.

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The cab drew up just outside the office of a sporting newspaper. I got out, and raised my hand to him. He raised his in his grave way. The cab swung round and set off westwards, and that was the end.

When I heard of his death I felt that his interest in life would soon get itself into another body, and come here again to look on and listen. When a life ends, it is a sign that Nature's purpose in that life is over. When a personality has passed from us it is a sign that life has no further need of it. What that personality did may matter. What that personality was does not matter. Man's task is to leave the dead alone. Life would be finer if we did not drag that caddisworm's house of the past behind us.

I have not set down all my memories of him. Much of what he told and said to me was told and said in the confidence of friendship. I have set down only a few odd fragments to show those who care to know what sort of a man he was. Lies and lives will be written of him ; plenty of both. Enough should be said to defeat the malice and stupidity of detractors. Those who want to know what he was in himself should read

the poems. The poems are the man speaking. They are so like him that to read them is to hear him. The couplet—

“ But they are rotten (I ask their pardon,)
And we’ve the sun on rock and garden”

gives me, whenever I read it, the feeling that he is in the room, looking up with his hard, quick guttural laugh and kindling eyes, from the rolling of a cigarette. The issue of “Samhain” for December, 1904, contains a portrait of him by Mr. J. B. Yeats. It is difficult to believe that there can be any portrait more like him.

I wrote down these memories in January and February, 1911, two years after Synge’s death, and three and a half years after I had parted from him. They were printed in the “Contemporary Review” for April, 1911, and are reprinted here through the kindness of the Editor and Proprietors, whom I wish to thank. Four years have passed since I wrote this account, and in reading it over to-day one or two little things, as the use of particular words in what I quote from him, etc., have made me pause, as possibly inexact.

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I have not altered these things, because, when I wrote this account, my memory of the events and words was sharper than it is to-day. Memory is a bad witness, and inexact in very little things, such as the precise words used in talk some years before. The reader must, however, believe that the words quoted, if not the very words used by Synge, are as near to the very words as my memory can make them.

I have been asked to add to these memories a few notes, and the chief dates in Synge's life, as far as we know them. His life, like that of any other artist, was dated not by events, but by sensations. I know no more of his significant days than the rest of the world, but the known biographical facts are these.

He was born on 16th April, 1871, at Newtown Little, near Dublin. He was the youngest son and eighth child of John Hatch Synge, barrister, and of Kathleen, his wife (born Traill). His father died in 1872. His mother in 1908. He went to private schools in Dublin and in Bray, but being seldom well, left school when about fourteen and then

studied with a tutor ; was fond of wandering alone in the country, noticing birds and wild life, and later took up music, piano, flute and violin. All through his youth, he passed his summer holidays in Annamoe, Co. Wicklow, a strange place, which influenced him.

He entered Trinity College, Dublin, on June 18, 1888, won prizes in Hebrew and Irish in Trinity term, 1892, and took his B.A. degree (second class) in December, 1892. While at Trinity he studied music at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, where he won a scholarship in Harmony and Counterpoint.

He left College undecided about a career, but was inclined to make music his profession. He went to Germany (Coblentz and Würzburg) to study music ; but in 1894, owing to a disappointed love, he gave up this, and went to Paris, with some thought of becoming a writer. He was much in France for the next few years writing constantly to little purpose ; he went to Italy in 1896, and in May, 1898, made his first visit to the Aran Islands. During this visit he began the first drafts of the studies which afterwards grew to be his book, "The Aran

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Islands." His writings, up to this time, had been tentative and imitative, being mainly reflections from (and upon) what had most struck him in his reading. He had read considerably in some six languages (Hebrew, Irish, German, Italian, French and English), and widely in at least four of them, besides his scholarship in the universal language of music. Among his early plans for books were schemes for a translation from some of the prose of St. Francis of Assisi (which he abandoned, because an English translation was published at the time), and for a critical study of Racine, whose pure and noble art always meant much to him. Some critical and other writings of this period exist in manuscript. They are said to be carefully written, but wanting in inner impulse.

Throughout this period if not throughout his life he lived with the utmost ascetic frugality, bordering always, or touching, on poverty. He used to say that his income was "forty pounds a year and a new suit of clothes, when my old ones get too shabby." He had no expensive habits, he was never self-indulgent, he had no wish to entertain nor to give away, no desire to make nor to

own money, no taste for collection nor zest for spending. He eschewed all things that threatened his complete frugal independence and thereby the integrity of his mind.

The superficial man, not seeing this last point, sometimes felt that he "did not know how to abound."

When in Paris, in 1899, he met Mr. W. B. Yeats, who, having seen his work, suggested that he would do well to give up writing criticism, and go again to the Aran Islands to study the life there, and fill his mind with real and new images, so that, if he wrote later, his writing might be lively and fresh and his subject a new discovery. He did as Mr. Yeats suggested and went back to the Aran Islands and passed some weeks in Inishmaan. In all, he made five or six visits to the Aran Islands, these two of 1898 and 1899, and certainly three more in the autumns of 1900, 1901, 1902. The Islanders liked him but were a little puzzled by him. He was an unassertive, unassuming man, with a genius for being inconspicuous. He has told us that his usual method in a poor man's cabin was to make them forget that he was there, but in Aran on these visits

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he always tried to add to the fun and to his personal prestige, with conjuring tricks, fiddling, piping, taking photographs, etc. Some of the Islanders were much attached to him. I suppose that their main impression was that he was a linguist who had committed a crime somewhere and had come to hide.

His next three or four years, 1899-1902, were passed between Paris and Ireland; Paris in the winter and spring and Ireland in the other seasons. He was at work on "The Aran Islands," and on his three early one-act plays, "The Tinker's Wedding," "Riders to the Sea," and "The Shadow of the Glen." He came to London in the winter of 1902-3, where I saw him as I have described. London did not suit him and he did not stay long. He gave up his room in Paris at this time, with some searching of the heart; for at thirty one clings to youth. After this, he was mostly in Ireland, in the wilder West and elsewhere; writing and perfecting. At the end of 1904 he was in Dublin, for the opening of the Abbey Theatre, of which he was one of the advisers. In June, 1905, he went through the Congested Districts of Connemara, with Mr.

Jack B. Yeats. After this expedition, which lasted a month, he was generally in or near Dublin, in Kingstown and elsewhere, though he made summer excursions to Dingle, the Blasket Islands, Kerry, etc. About once a year, when the Abbey Theatre Company was touring in England, he came with it if his health allowed, to watch the performances in London, Manchester or Edinburgh, wherever they might be. His life was always mainly within himself; the record of these years is very meagre; all that can be said of them is that he passed them mostly in Ireland, writing and re-writing, in failing health and with increasing purpose. His general health was never robust, and for at least the last six years of his life his throat troubled him. He used to speak of the trouble as "his glands;" I cannot learn its exact nature; but I have been told that it was "cancer" or "some form of cancer," which caused him "not very great pain," but which "would have been excessively painful had he lived a little longer." Doctors may be able to conclude from these vague statements what it was. He was operated upon in May, 1908, but the growth could not be removed,

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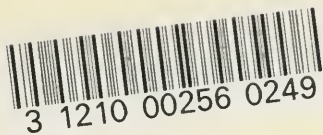
and from that time on he was under sentence of death. He passed his last few months of life trying to finish his play of "Deirdre" and writing some of his few poems. He died in a private nursing home in Dublin on the 24th March, 1909, and was buried two days later in a family vault in the Protestant graveyard of Mount Jerome, Harold's Cross, Dublin. He had been betrothed, but not married.

One thing more needs to be said. People have stated that Synge's masters in art were the writers of the French Decadent school of the eighteen-nineties, Verlaine, Mallarmé, J. K. Huysmans, etc. Synge had read these writers (who has not ?) ; I often talked of them with him. So far as I know, they were the only writers for whom he expressed dislike. As a craftsman he respected their skill, as an artist he disliked their vision. The dislike he plainly stated in a review of Huysmans' "La Cathédrale" ("The Speaker," April, 1903) and in an allusion to the same author's "À Rebours," in one of his Prefaces. I do not know who his masters in art may have been ; that is

one of the personal things he would not willingly have told ; but from what I can remember, I should say that his favourite author, during the greater part of his life, was Racine.

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